KEEPING AN ARMED PEACE IS A HAIR TRIGGER BUSINESS

The Mexican Border Is a Real Frontier These Days and Both Officers and Privates Have to Be Diplomats as Well as Soldiers, Ready Equally for Fight or Frolic

Unarmed and innocent looking.

By EDWIN C. HILL.

YOUNG Kilgore, private in the Twenty-eighth Infantry and sentinel of the border patrol, leaned from a cupola window of the abandoned and dismantled court house at Hidalgo, Tex., and gave his sun-baked face to the cool sweep of the trade winds. It was a little after midnight and the breeze was flowing steadily, deliciously, from the Gulf 100 miles to the southeast. It was one of the few things that made life endurable along the border, and up and down the Rio Grande the river guards were laving their smarting bodies in its coolness and thanking the Lord that sleep was not far off.

But young Kilgore had not been sent to perch himself in the old bell-tower merely to enjoy the trade winds. He was one of a company of infantrymen that guard ten desolate miles of the yellow river, one of the handful of picked men exiled in a district of unbelievable loneliness. He and hundreds like him posted along the 1,800 miles of the border from Brownsville to Nogales were there to see that the Mexicanos did not sneak across the river and strike at the villages and ranches. It was a man's job, and many nights of tense watching had left their mark on the boy. So much hung upon his alertness and common sense.

Many of the wild tales of border raids spring from the overstrained nerves of sentinels and from the eagerness of correspondents to supplement prosy stories of troop movements and the camp gossip with yarns of action. Away off in the chaparral or along the river sands a sentinel spies a moving figure. Night and loneliness suggest sinister possibilities.

The sentinel challenges. There is no reply. He fires two shots for the guard, and when the men come running, rubbing their sleepy eyes with one hand and gripping rifles with the other, the moving figure has faded into the thickets. Often it is nothing more dangerous than a coyote or a strayed burro, or maybe a miserable peon trying to slip across the river to the safety and good food he knows he will find on the American side.

Kilgore had blundered once or twice and blushed whenever he recalled the comments of his company commander. Company commanders have a special vocabulary for field service, and nine out of ten among the border guards would rather be kicked by a mule than bring upon themselves the stinging reproof that bad judgment provokes.

Ten miles to the north, along the branch line of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad which crawls westward for eighty miles from Harlingen to Samfordyce, are 25,000 troops quartered in their comfortable camps, whole brigades from New York, Indiana, Texas, Illinois and half a dozen other States, 25,000 good men keen for a fight and ready to surge to the Rio Grande in motor trucks, flivver cars and army wagons, but they must not be shaken from their blessed slumber whenever a border guard thinks he sees the skirmishers of an advancing enemy.

Generals get red in the face when such mistakes are made and they have a way of passing their anger down the line through colonels and captains and lieutenants until their bad temper lights upon the particularly offending private. Columns of men and truck trains must not be sent pellmell over half made military roads and thumped across treacherous arroyos merely because a kid sentinel suffers from nerves.

Kilgore watched carefully, his night glass sweeping the river banks, studying every object along the sands, scrutinizing the big flat bottomed boat that serves as a ferry between Reynosa, the considerable town on the Mexican side, and Hidalgo; scrutinizing the waste of mesquite and chaparral and hummocks of drifted sands that stretch away to the south into mysterious Mexico; prying among the curious shadows of the Mexican quarter, studying their silent jacals; body rigid, every nerve keened, ready to sound a real alarm.

It was outpost duty of the most trying sort. Upon Kilgore's good eyesight and common sense might depend peace or war. It was a possibility.

From where he swung his heels his levelled glass gave him a wide sweep of country fairly visible in the rich moonlight. The river, taking a great curve as it swung between the American Hidalgo and the Mexican Reynosa, showed almost as clear as by day, its muddy, shallow channel hardly wider than Broadway. But the light was tricky and deceptive as it bathed the chaparral and there were many wide, deep stretches looming black revealing nothing. The night was full of noises—the whistling of river birds that stir just before and just after midnight, the far off challenge of a coyote, sounding at times like the shriek of a woman in agony; murmurs mutterings, the crackling of twigs, the swish of bodies disturbing the thickets.

Suddenly Kilgore swore under his breath and his glass held steady upon the blackthorn tangle a quarter of a mile across the Rio Grande. He watched it an hour, then when his relief appeared, surrendered his post without confiding to his comrade what he had seen.

In the morning he reported to his commander, Capt. Ned Green.

"Thought you'd like to know, sir, that the Mexicanos are occupying a trench just over the river."

"Nonsense!" said the Captain. "What do they want with a trench over there? You've been seeing things, Kilgore."

"I don't want to contradict you, sir, but I know what I am talking about. If you will visit me to-night I will show you something that may surprise you."

The company commander sat for two hours in the old bell tower sixty feet above the plaza that night fighting mosquitoes with a bite like the jab of a red hot needle and jibing the guard occasionally for failing to make good. Then, an hour after midnight, there was a tiny flash of fire in the blackness of the chaparral, a mere pin point of red.

Presently another fire point sprang up, then another and another, until there was a long and orderly line of minute lights. They ran as straight as the lights of Fifth avenue. Sometimes they brightened. Sometimes they went dull. Capt. Green stared in amazement. Then he laughed.

"I take it back, Kilgore," he said. "You were right. It's a line of trenches, of course. There's nothing to do but keep an eye on those fellows. It's hard to say what they are up to."

"Their cigarettes gave the stunt away," said the Captain in relating this little episode of the border patrol. "There isn't a Mexican alive who can go an hour without burning tobacco. They had taken every other precaution to avoid being spotted, but finally one of them had to light up. Then he passed his glowing cigarette to the next man and so it went all along the trench line. It was better than a movie show."

From where we sat in an ancient hotel from which proprietor and guests had long since fled and which was used now as barracks and office by the company of border guards, the housetops of Reynosa across and a little up the river were plainly visible. A tall tower, like the court house tower in Hidalgo, rose above the red and blue and yellow roofs, so colorful in their setting of dark green verdure.

The Captain passed his glass. It brought close and clear the figure of a Mexican soldier upon the Reynosa watch tower studying us as intently as we scrutinized him.

"They are always on the job," laughed Green, "but they haven't tried to pull off any fancy business for some time. A few weeks ago one of the civil functionaries over there figured he could organize a little raid and relieve the despised gringos of horses and provisions and cash. They might have got away with it, but a friend of mine in the Constitutionalist army tipped me off, and we were so obviously ready for them all along the river, with every ford and crossing heavily guarded, that they decided to wait until another day."

"A Mexican officer warned you, Captain?"

"Sure," laughed Green. "There's a lot of that going on under the surface. There are some good hombres among the Mexicanos, and they don't want trouble if it can be avoided.

"Some of them used to come over and visit with me, sit and smoke my tobacco and eat my grub and so on. I suppose that would have made their big bosses pretty sore. I enjoyed it and so did they.

"Recently an order went out from Carranza or Obregon or Nafarrete or somebody in authority over there that there must be no more visiting, and so my friends come no more. However, they are quite apt to keep me posted, and some of them still send over on the quiet for a sack of corn for their horses."

It was noon as we talked. A thin stream of Mexicans, mostly old men and women, and a few children, ragged and dirty to an incredible degree, was moving to the ferry burdened with sacks of flour, with groceries and calico and sides of bacon. Another stream, empty handed as yet, was coming from the ferry. Slim, brown faced boys belabored their burros. The United States customs inspector walked along the lines, tapping this, fingering that and jerking out a few words of Spanish as he performed his duty of seeing that nothing contraband crossed the river. A veterinary with a big Colt strapped to his hip examined the few thin burros and rickety horses.

"You see?" asked Green. "The embargo on food has been relieved to a limited extent and the Mexicans are now permitted to come over here and get a day's rations. All up the river there are thousands that would literally starve to death if they couldn't get a food supply on this side. One gets to feel sorry for the very old and for the poor little pinched faced babies. They are sure getting a rotten deal in this life."

A ranchman in Hidalgo to try to run down stolen stock came out of the shack they call a custom house and crossed the plaza, roughly elbowing through a group of Mexicans. Some moved too slowly to suit him and he damned them up and down. One sees a good deal of that sort of thing along the border and gets to wondering if the general attitude of regarding a Mexican as one of the lowest of God's creatures, of reviling him in his hearing, of pointing him out to visitors as an awful thing, of shouldering him off the sidewalks and the roads hasn't something to do with the sullen hate the Mexicans feel for Americans.

Most of them are dirty. Most of them are lazy. Some of them are utterly confirmed liars. But one feels inclined to doubt that the contempt and dislike so frankly displayed by some classes of Americans are apt to improve international relations or to make for better feeling between the two races. The Mexican may not understand why he is idealized in Washington and cursed along the border.

Like most border patrol squads, Capt. Green's little command is as much cut off from the world as if it were set down in the Brazilian jungle. A thin strand of telephone wire connects it with Mission, on the railroad ten miles to the north, where there are thousands of troops encamped.

Motor trucks come along every day or so with stores of food and ice, but there are no amusements or relaxations, few visitors to break the monotony, nothing to enliven the deadly dulness or to relieve loneliness. There isn't a motion picture show within ten miles. There is no band. The society of women is denied these men.

"What do you do to keep them cheerful?" I asked the Captain.

"Work 'em," he said. "Men that stay idle in this climate and under these conditions are apt to go wrong if they are not worked to the limit of endurance. They get no booze. That would be the same as suicide here, where the mercury stands at 125 degrees any day in the sun and is seldom less than 100 in the shade.

"I take them on long hikes, set them to improving camp, think up a lot of things. We get up little vaudeville shows among ourselves whenever we have the extra energy. It's a great life, this border patrol.

"Do you know what I would like best of all? No? Well, it would be to have some good djinn whisk the Winter Garden show here bodily and bring Jim Churchill's or Jack's along with it—only for one night."

Green's command is better off than many such squads. It is nearer to the railroad base than some. It gets ice regularly. Once in a while a visitor bobs up with news of the outside world. But all along the river at the crossing places, at Brownsville, across from Matamoras; at Hidalgo, Santa Maria, Samfordyce, Rio Grande, Laredo, across from Nuevo Laredo, the border patrols on the most responsible and nerve wrecking duty fight against the devils of loneliness and wonder whether their work is going to count for anything or not. Some day a Kipling or a Serviss or a Zane Grey will discover these sentinels of an old yet new frontier and will put them where they belong, with the Northwest Mounted Police and the Texas Rangers, into good, red blooded fiction—fiction built squarely upon fact.

Capt. Green brought out the orders and general instructions for his command. They tell a story in themselves and do not require elaboration to present to the reader a sharply defined picture of border patrol work. Here are the main requirements of border patrolling:

1. Sentinels at night will watch in all directions for rockets.

To see that the Mexicanos did not sneak across the border.

2. Pieces will be carried with magazines filled.

3. At night sentinels will fire only to give alarm.

4. The presence of new troops requires caution to avoid accidents.

5. When an alarm is given the guard will proceed toward the firing and notify the cavalry detachment to take charge of the pump plant.

6. The guard will challenge between taps and daylight.

7. Commander of the guard will examine all sentinels and report poorest and best instructed.

8. Corporals of reliefs will examine the reliefs once while on post.

9. All telephone calls will be answered at the guard house.

10. All crossing of the river at night is illegal and all crossing during the day is illegal except those made at the custom house.

11. No soldiers are permitted to go into the river.

12. No shooting of any kind is permitted along the river bank.

13. Soldiers at this station are required to be in their camps between taps and reveille. Those found out of camps will be taken to their camps. Soldiers belonging to this camp will be taken to the guard house.

14. To call the guard, fire two shots. To give alarm for the company to turn out, fire five shots rapidly and continue to fire rapidly.

There are minor orders and additional instructions in the routine, but much has to be left to the intelligence and good judgment of the enlisted men.

The hamlet of Madera lies back among the mesquite thickets near the Rio Grande and west of Hidalgo. It is more exposed to attack than Hidalgo and incessant watch has to be kept against raiders, gun runners and plain smugglers. Lieut. Jim Kendrick of the Second Texas organized militia commands here with a half company of lean, brown faced lads, and they are the only white men for miles around.

Madera is simply a collection of thatched huts with the inevitable Mexican beer saloon. The Texans are encamped within a fort, literally, and are protected on every side from attack. Their tents are raised within a quadrangle half the size of a New York city block, around which runs a mud wall four feet high.

Dirt roads, ankle deep in dust in dry weather and knee deep in gluey mud in rainy weather, lead to the Rio Grande, a pistol shot from camp. Compared to Madera, Hidalgo is a gay resort. There are only two amusements—waiting for the mail and shooting wild doves.

There is another, perhaps—frisking the Mexican population of arms illegally possessed. Every s often Kendrick must make the rounds of the countryside to collect the arms and ammunition that accumulate mysteriously. In his quarters he has to show an arsenal of ancient and decayed revolvers, new automatics, Winchesters, soft nosed bullets notched to make them mushroom, ugly knives. These things must be rounded up or trouble would be sure to result, and rounding them up is no easy job. It takes diplomacy.

We walked to the river bank and watched the yellow water surging over quicksands and bars. Kendrick pointed toward a big drove of horses that were feeding along the Mexican shore.

"Stolen, most of them," he said. "Cut out of ranch bunches and slipped across the river somehow. We have to watch out for that all the time.

"Of course there is always the likelihood of being rushed at night and shot up. The Mexicans are pretty cute about that game. Nowadays they don't try to cross the river as a military expedition. They sneak over by ones and twos, unarmed and innocent looking, and make the plea that they want to leave Mexico for good and all.

"Then they will rendezvous on this side, back somewhere in the brush, get arms from a friendly countryman who had arranged to supply them, and ride forth, full fledged raiders. Like as not they will have picked in advance a ranch house to attack and loot.

"A few weeks ago west of here one of these parties got a surprise. They showed up just at dawn at a ranch run by an American with sand in his craw. The old Mexican woman who cooks for him spotted them while they were cutting horses out of the corral and she awakened the boss.

"He grabbed his Winchester, settled into a comfortable position at the window sill and let 'em have it. The Mexican woman got the other rifle and knelt by his side. When she emptied one gun she handed the other. He killed three bandits at the corral and winged three or four more before the survivors had had enough.

"Oh, there are lots of stories like that. This is a real frontier nowadays with fighting going on somewhere along the border. We may get our chance any night. I do wish they would send me a machine gun though. We could use a nice little machine gun here right handy."

The sun was dropping down into the mesquite, a kid's red balloon of a sun, when I shook hands with the lieutenant, wished him good luck and turned my auto north and back to the railroad back to towns and crowded camps. He was a lonely seeming figure as he waved farewell from the head of the road.

Any officer in such case has a hard role to play, harder than that of the men. They have each other at least for jokes and horse play, but good discipline cautions against familiarity between officers and men. The officer must walk alone.

Come over to visit, smoke and eat.

RAILROAD EXECUTIVES SHOW HARD HEADS BUT WARM HEARTS

By OLIN L. LYMAN.

"PERHAPS you think the hard headed lions of the railroad game have no hearts?"

The speaker was a prominent executive of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad Company. For forty years he served several of the big transcontinental lines of America and his acquaintance with kings of the steel rails is large.

"Any SUN man who is acquainted with the hurly burly of your exacting business," I replied, "would imagine that they need their hearts for the sole purpose of pumping energy."

"That is the common conception," he pursued. "The public reads of the relentless warfare for business, of the iron fist exploited in deals and in directorates. So people doubt the existence of the human side. Yet if you pause to think, this human side must exist or the whole fabric—which is built upon personal cooperation of appreciation and service—falls to the ground.

"I knew the late James J. Hill very well. Two years ago I was in the employ of the Great Northern, with headquarters in St. Paul. Mr. Hill then was supposed to have 'retired.' He had 'retired' like the boys in the European trenches did after the peace ship sailed with Henry Ford and his companions.

"Jim Hill was a very unusual man. He never bored anybody. Men alternately hated and loved him. Many spread broadcast the misinformation that his heart simply served as a ticker.

"There was a reason for this. He would find an employee reneging on the job. This employee soon would kiss his job good-by with an impetus that would jar his back teeth loose. Thereafter he would tell everybody that Mr. Hill's heart was made of the stuff you put in the top of refrigerators.

"Mr. Hill did things that proved the contrary, but he never megaphoned his good deeds. Here's a story that fell under my notice. It shows the 'soft' side of Jim Hill.

"Some years ago a boy 12 years old stealing a ride on one of the Great Northern trains near St. Paul fell under the wheels and lost a leg. In a few days an adjuster of the Great Northern interviewed the boy. He asked the little fellow what he thought the Great Northern owed him.

"'That's all right,' replied the little chap. 'You see I hadn't any business to be on the car. I'd run away from home, and I'd stole the ride on the railroad, an' I just got what was comin' to me, that's all. No, the road don't owe me nothin'.'

"The adjuster, marvelling, went away. He told the story at the office and in time it reached Jim Hill.

"'Somebody who admits that a railroad doesn't owe him anything?' Mr. Hill asked. 'Is he human?'

"'Less one leg,' he was told. 'Of course, he's only a boy. That might account for it.'

"'I never met a young boy yet who didn't consider that the world owed him everything,' replied the trail blazer. 'I think this youngster is worth investigating.'

"He investigated him. As a starter he bought him the best artificial leg that money could buy, and he purchased bigger legs as the boy grew. He put him through preparatory school and college. Mr. Hill figured the boy worth a substantial start in life and reports are that the young man is developing as the veteran expected.

"Moreover, Mr. Hill looked up the boy's father. He was a discouraged struggler. He started him in business and he is prospering. That particular family is numbered among the myriad Hill rooters to-day.

"The late E. G. Russell, for years on the Central force, was a fine railroad man," continued the official. "Russell was for some years superintendent of the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg division of the New York Central. Before the Central acquired that road it was known diversely as the 'mo'tack' and the 'Rotten Wood and Old Rusty Rails.'

"When the road was being developed and extended to meet the growing traffic needs of the country Mr. Russell was named as superintendent. He did yeoman's service for the cause, but left it to accept a responsible post with a Canadian line. He figured prominently in the administration of several great Canadian systems before his death a few years ago.

"Mr. Russell was one of the sternest disciplinarians who ever served any railroad system. But he could make railroad men! The finest talent serving various systems in North America to-day had its training under him.

"He was one of the pioneer executives of the country in the game of the steel rails to carry on an uncompromising war against booze. In those easier days the ordinary superintendent was satisfied if his men didn't indulge while on duty. Mr. Russell went a distance that was unique in those days. He insisted that his men should not indulge at all.

"This roused deep resentment among some. They insisted that his order interfered with their personal privilege. To show their independence some of them took pains to secure drinks in a saloon opposite the station at Watertown, N. Y., before leaving on runs, right in line with Mr. Russell's windows.

"In jig time some of the most skilled veterans on the division received their blue envelopes. Raging, they visited Mr. Russell's office. He told them if they wanted to switch their views to meet his they could have another chance.

"Among the men who returned, intending to stick to the water cart, was a man whom I will call Jim Landis. He lived with his wife and five children in Watertown. He was the crack engineer of the division, but he liked his liquor.

"Mr. Russell gave him two or three chances, showing more consideration than he did for most of them, but finally he had to let him go. This was a few months after Mr. Russell's assumption of the superintendency. Within a week Landis disappeared.

"One day an old 'hobkie' came riding under a freight car from Syracuse to Watertown, via Richland. As the train came to a halt he rolled from under, and brushed the cinders off himself, keeping an eye out for the watchful 'shack.' Then he strolled up the track toward the 'hog,' looking around wonderingly. There was a new station, quadrupled yard space and general improvements that had come with the Central's campaign through that section. His rheumy eyes blinked up at a good looking engineer in the cab of the Baldwin that had hauled him free from Syracuse.

"'Say,' he said apologetically, 'I haven't been in this section in years. I used to pilot an engine on this run myself. I got to lickin' the booze too hard an' got let out. That was twenty years ago.'

"The young engineer hopped down and started to oil the drivers. 'That so?' he asked sympathetically.

"'Yes. I didn't see a really sober day for years. An' all of a sudden, in Cleveland the other day, I took stock of myself. "Here, you bum," says I, "go on back home an' take a fresh start. Make what's left of your life decent." So I'm here. I want to get track o' things. I s'pose you're acquainted around here. Did you ever hear of a family named Landis?'

"The young chap whirled on him. There were explanations. The tramp was Jim Landis, returned for his fresh start. The young engineer was his eldest son, Chris, who was less than 12 years old when his father left. The mother had died in three years and the children now were all grown and doing well.

"When he had heard this and was wiping his red eyes over the fate of the wife whom he had deserted Jim quavered.

"'It was Super Russell that let me out, but he gave me chances enough. I wish I'd listened to him. What's become of him?'

"'Russell?' echoed his son. 'He's dead; died in Canada. And say, he was a prince; he stood by!'

"Then he told the second half of the story. After Jim Landis disappeared Superintendent Russell called upon his wife, upon whose efforts the five children were then dependent. Mr. Russell insisted on helping financially. He took a special interest in Chris. A year before the mother's death Mr. Russell gave Chris a job as messenger in his office. He watched him, noted that his trend was more toward the mechanical than for office detail, and switched him to overalls as soon as he was old enough.

"When Mr. Russell went to Canada Chris went along and was soon a fireman. Soon after Mr. Russell died Chris was made an engineer and helped educate the younger children.

"So, thanks to the kindly heart under the steel shell of E. G. Russell, old Jim Landis found a prosperous family upon his return.

"Old Jim now is occupying a humble position with the division at Watertown. He's off the liquor for good. Chris has been called west and is climbing the construction ladder of a big system. This improvement in the financial condition of the Landis family is due to Mr. Russell, the martinet who they said 'had no heart.'"